

“THIS TIME THE VOTERS ARE MORE INFLUENTIAL THAN EVER”
SPITZENKANDIDATEN PROCESS AS A MEASURE TO COMBAT
DEMOCRACY DEFICIT

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

The thesis sheds light on European Union's attempts to increase the voting turn out and decrease democratic deficit in the European Parliament elections by focusing on Spitzenkandidaten process, a reform implemented the first time in the 2014 elections. Still, in the spring 2018, the Spitzenkandidaten process is under discussion on the EU level whether it should be applied also in the future elections when the new parliament and the new President for Commission will be elected. The research has aimed to produce essential and topical information for the decision makers when making up one's minds whether to support or not to support the reform.

The research takes a closer look on the EU citizens' views and public opinion on the process. The theories and criticism of earlier research are applied and tested by studying three research questions. The research questions are formulated as follows:

- 1) *To what extent the attitudes towards the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?*
- 2) *To what extent the position on the scale of political left and political right explains the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union?*
- 3) *To what extent the level of awareness about the processes of decision making in the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?*

The data studied in this thesis contains the data set of the Parlemeter of the European Parliament (EB/EP 82.4). The data was processed and analyzed with SPSS version 24 (SPSS Inc., Chicago IL). The results of the ordinal regression analysis show that more a person thinks his/her country's membership of the EU is a good thing, the more likely person is willing to think that the Spitzenkandidaten process represents progress for democracy. In addition, image on the EU has statistically significant relation with the attitude towards the Spitzenkandidaten process. The better image of the EU a person has, the more likely person is willing to think that the Spitzenkandidaten process represents progress for democracy. The ordinal regression analysis shows that the citizens' position on the scale of political "left" and "right" does not explain statistically significantly the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union. According to the ordinal regression analysis, the better level of political awareness, both objectively and subjectively measured, the more likely person is willing to think Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy.

This research and its findings emphasize the role of political awareness as one of key elements to focus on when combating the democratic deficit in the European Union. The finding of this research support the findings in earlier research: Democratic deficit occurs until the EU-citizens understand how the Union effect on their lives (Wass 2014: 37). To be able to form opinions about the innovations like Spitzenkandidaten process in the future, citizens would need to be better informed about the reforms. More focus should be given to the active communication between the EU decision makers and the citizens.

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European Union, political participation, legitimacy, democracy, Spitzenkandidaten, public opinion



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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract Tämä tutkimus luotaa EU:n jäsenvaltioiden kansalaisten näkemyksiä kärkiehdokasmenettelyyn (Spitzenkandidaten) liittyen. Vuonna 2014 Euroopan parlamenttivaalien yhteydessä toteutetulla kärkiehdokasmenettelyllä EU pyrki nostamaan äänestysprosenttia Euroopan parlamenttivaalien yhteydessä sekä tukemaan EU:n demokratiakehitystä. Keväällä 2018 kärkiehdokasmenettelyn soveltamisesta tulevien Euroopan parlamenttivaalien yhteydessä ei olla EU-tasolla yksimielisiä. Tutkimuksella pyrittiin tuottamaan ajankohtaista ja oleellista tietoa päätöksenteon tueksi, harkittaessa kannattaisiko prosessia soveltaa myös vuoden 2019 vaaleissa. Tutkimus tarkastelee EU:n kansalaisten näkemyksiä prosessia kohtaan. Aiheeseen liittyvää aikaisempaa tutkimusta soveltaen ja kärkiehdokasmenettelyn kohtaama kritiikki huomioon ottaen tutkimuksen tutkimuskysymykset ovat: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) <i>Missä määrin asenteet Euroopan unionia kohtaan selittävät kansalaisten suhtautumista kärkiehdokasmenetelmää kohtaan EU:n demokratiakehityksen näkökulmasta tarkasteltuna?</i>2) <i>Missä määrin poliittinen suuntautuneisuus vasemmisto-oikeisto-akselilla mitattuna selittää suhtautumista kärkiehdokasmenetelmää kohtaan EU:n demokratiakehityksen näkökulmasta tarkasteltuna?</i>3) <i>Missä määrin tietotaso Euroopan unionin toiminnasta selittää suhtautumista kärkiehdokasmenetelmää kohtaan EU:n demokratiakehityksen näkökulmasta tarkasteltuna?</i> Tutkimuksessa käytetty data (EB/EP 82.4) analysointiin SPSS versio 24:n (SPSS Inc., Chicago IL) avulla. Ordinaalisen regressioanalyysin tulosten perusteella voidaan todeta, että mitä vahvemmin henkilö kannattaa maansa jäsenyyttä EU:ssa, sitä todennäköisemmin henkilö kannattaa myös väittämää, jonka mukaan kärkiehdokasmenettely on EU:n demokratiakehityksen kannalta suotuisa asia. Mielikuva EU:sta vaikuttaa myös tilastollisesti merkittävästi: Mitä parempi mielikuva EU:sta henkilöllä on, sitä todennäköisemmin henkilö kannattaa myös väittämää, jonka mukaan kärkiehdokasmenettely on EU:n demokratiakehityksen kannalta suotuisa asia. Poliittisella suuntautuneisuudella, vasemmisto – oikeisto -akselilla mitattuna, ei ole ei tilastollisesta merkittävää vaikutusta henkilön kantaan kärkiehdokasmenettelyn vaikutuksista EU:n demokratiakehitykseen. Kansalaisten tietotason Euroopan unionin toimintaa kohtaan, niin objektiivisesti kuin subjektiivisesti mitattuna, nähdään vaikuttavan suhtautumiseen kärkiehdokasmenettelyyn. Mitä paremmin tietoisia Euroopan unioniin liittyvistä asioista kansalaiset ovat, sitä todennäköisemmin he kannattavat myös väittämää, jonka mukaan kärkiehdokasmenettely on EU:n demokratiakehityksen kannalta suotuisa asia. Tutkimukset tulokset korostavat kansalaisten poliittisen tietoisuuden (EU:n toimintaa kohtaan) olevan oleellinen tarkasteltava ulottuvuus EU:n demokratiakehityksen kannalta. Tutkimustulokset tukevat aikaisempaa EU:n demokratiakehitykseen liittyvien tutkimusten tuloksia, joiden mukaan demokratiavajetta on haastava torjua Euroopan unionissa, mikäli kansalaiset eivät ymmärrä miten Euroopan unioni vaikuttaa heidän elämäänsä (Wass 2014: 37). EU:n reformit ja innovaatiot demokratiavajeen kitkemiseksi, jollaiseksi kärkiehdokasmenetelmä tässä tutkimuksessa mielletään, edellyttävät onnistuakseen EU:n päätöksentekijöiden ja kansalaisten välistä aktiivista kommunikaatiota liittyen reformeihin ja reformien tavoitteisiin.			
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the research

This thesis highlights the relationship between the citizens and the European Union's institutions and aims to participate in ongoing discussion on the changing nature of European Union and its future. The findings of this research emphasize the role of political awareness as one of key elements to focus on when combating the democratic deficit in the European Union.

This thesis analyzes the paradox in the European Parliament elections 2014: Although the voter were “*more influential than ever*” (*European Parliament 2014*) the European-wide turnout of the elections 2014 reached a new record low. The thesis sheds light on European Union's attempts to increase the voting turn out and decrease democratic deficit in the European Parliament elections by focusing on *Spitzenkandidaten process*, a reform implemented first time in the 2014 elections.

The low turnout in the European Parliament elections highlights the need for strengthen the democracy in the European Union. While the EU's democratic nature would be considered in all respects something worth aspire to, practical realization is often difficult when taking into account the challenges arising from the decision-making structures, as well as interest of the national parliaments and governments to maintain their own legitimacy at the expense of EU-level actors (Wass 2014: 30 – 37.) The declining legitimacy of the EU and its institutions has also been criticized to be the biggest challenges of the European level democracy (Thomassen 2016: 545).

The Spitzenkandidaten process had a little impact on the turnout in the elections 2014, but the process and its consequences are one step in the ever-going rival for power in the European Union between supranational institutions and the member states (Deckram 2016: 1). Still, in the spring 2018, the Spitzenkandidaten process is under discussion on the EU level whether it should be applied also in the future elections when the new parliament and the new President for Commission will be elected. The research aims to produce essential and topical information for the decision makers when making up one's

minds whether to support or not to support the reform.

On the process, European-level parties had proposed rival candidates, the so called Spitzenkandidaten (lead candidates) to run for the president of the Commission prior to the elections (Hobolt 2014: 2). In this way, the President of “*European Commission, the EU's executive body, which initiates legislation and supervises its implementation*” (European Parliament 2014) was determined by taking into account the results the European Parliament elections.

It is worth noticing, that in the process, the candidate of the highest-ranking political party will not automatically be elected as President of the European Commission. A candidate must succeed to gather a majority of support in the European Council and then in the European Parliament, to be elected. In 2014, as the Spitzenkandidaten process was implemented, the lead candidate from the winning party had the best chance of gaining a majority in both the European Council and the European Parliament. The outcome of the jury proposal was confirmed at the European Council on 27th June 2014 and in the European Parliament on 15th July 2014. This way, the Commission was able to become more political than its predecessors (Euroopan komissio 2018: 3.)

According the European Commission, the 2014 experiment should be continued and developed. The Commission highlights the need to continue the open debate for the best possible process (Euroopan komissio 2018: 4). The European Parliament has expressed that Parliament is not ready to support those candidates for the presidency of the Commission who have not been nominated as the Spitzenkandidaten, lead candidate, for the 2019 elections (Euroopan parlamentti 2018). The European Council has stated that it cannot give up its right to propose a nominee for the President of the Commission, unless the Treaty is amended (Eurooppa-neuvosto 2018). The potential next time to apply the process is already in the elections 2019. Therefore the Spitzenkandidaten process is highly topical subject to study.

There is a risk that different perspectives of these major European institutions and the lack of consensus on the issue make the whole Spitzenkandidaten process difficult to

perceive for the voter. If the voter has difficulties to understand how his / her vote affects the political system, the decrease in turnout may occur once again. From the perspective of EU's democratic development, that would not be anything worth hoping for. Low interest towards the European Parliament elections among the voters has often been explained with the theory of second-order elections; the policy making in the EU level is often considered so complex and distant that the ordinary citizen may not be even expected to be interested about it. Also, the result of the pan European elections may not be seen widely affecting in policies carried out in the domestic level. Controversially, Eurobarometer surveys show that the citizens of the Union are expecting the Union to act effective policy actions to combat unemployment, environmental problems and international organized crime, as well as in solving international crises - regardless of whether the Union has even power to intervene in these matters (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 158.)

As the most European citizens have a little knowledge of politics at the European level, political parties may have temptation to take advantage of the situation (Thomassen 2016: 554) and use European Parliament elections as opportunities *“to test their standing with public in terms of their domestic political agendas”* (Hobolt 2014: 4). Therefore, the elections may be seen mostly as a parameter measuring the popularity of the current government.

Practical realization of democratic and transparent decision-making in the European Union has been proved challenging (Wass 2014: 29). Role of the European Parliament (EP) and the Commission, and in particular the relationship between the leaders of these two EU-institutions has been strengthened after the European Parliament elections was connected to election of the President of the Commission in accordance with the treaty of Lisbon. Despite the strengthened role of the Parliament, the European Parliament elections *“have not brought about the genuine electoral connection between voters and EU policy-making that was hoped for.”* (Iso-Markku 2016.)

Spitzenkandidaten process was hoped to personalize the distant Brussels bureaucracy, strengthen the European element in the campaigns (Hobolt 2014: 3) and to increase the

turnout of the elections as well as to increase the legitimacy of the European institutions (Thomassen 2016: 544). On their research on the impact of lead candidates on voters' perceptions of the quality of democracy in the EU Popa, Rohrschneider and Schmitt (2015: 46) argue that the presence of Spitzenkandidaten, the lead candidates, in the European Parliament elections 2014 polarized the European public: *"Those who support the EU believe the EU has become more democratic as a result of the leading candidates. But those who generally view the EU skeptically oppose it even more when they are aware of the presence of pro-EU candidates."*

1.2. Research questions

Spitzenkandidaten process and especially the views of the citizens on its effects on the state of democracy within the EU are main topics of interest of this thesis.

Spitzenkandidaten process has faced criticism among researchers. *Spitzenkandidaten process* has been criticized that it polarized the European public (Popa, Rohrschneider and Schmitt 2015: 46) by making Eurosceptical voters became even more skeptical, and the other way around. It has been also criticized that the process failed to connect the will of the European electorate to European public policy as the process dearth the connection on the left-right dimension. In addition, the process is not seen to improve electoral accountability as it would require voters' awareness of party identity of the candidates. (Thomassen 2016: 545 - 549.)

This research takes a closer look on the EU citizens' views and public opinion on the process. The theories and criticism of earlier research are applied and tested by studying three research questions. The research questions are formulated as follows:

1) To what extent the attitudes towards the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?

2) To what extent the position on the scale of political left and political right explains the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union?

3) *To what extent the level of awareness about the processes of decision making in the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?*

The data studied in this thesis contains the data set of the Parlemeter of the European Parliament (EB/EP 82.4) conducted face-to-face by TNS opinion, in the 28 Member States, among 27801 EU citizens aged 15 and over. The data was processed and analyzed with SPSS version 24 (SPSS Inc., Chicago IL). As analytical method the ordinal regression analysis was used in this research.

1.3. Structure of the research

Earlier studies on political awareness and political trust, as well as on the explanations for the low European-wide turnout in the European parliament elections are introduced as the aim of this thesis is to highlight the relationship between the citizens and the European Union's institutions and to participate in ongoing discussion on the changing nature of European Union and its future.

The thesis has seven chapters. In the first chapter, the motivating paradox for this research is introduced: Although the voter were "*more influential than ever*" in the European Parliament elections 2014, the European-wide turnout of the elections 2014 reached a new record low.

The second chapter draws together findings of the earlier research and discussions on the factors that effect in the background when the public opinion on the EU is formed among its citizens. In the chapter political awareness is introduced as a basis for political activity. In addition, political trust and political legitimacy are emphasized notably important factors influencing the voters' minds when forming their opinion on the European Union. Also, the two dimensional nature of EU debates is introduced.

In chapter 3, three main explanations for the low European-wide turnout in the European parliament elections are introduced; European parliament elections as second order elections, lack of European demos and deficits of democracy and representation in the EU decision-making.

In chapter 4, the reader is introduced briefly into the core idea behind Spitzenkandidaten process and its impacts on the interinstitutional relations and EU party politics. Theory part of this thesis, chapters 1 - 4, aim to introduce the reader what Spitzenkandidaten process is and why it was implemented in the first place. The process is expounded as European Union's attempt to increase the voting turn out and decrease the democratic deficit in the European Parliament elections. The views of the citizens and the public opinion on Spitzenkandidaten process and its effects on the state of democracy within the EU is the main topic of interest.

The theories of earlier research introduced in the previous chapters are applied by studying hypotheses presented in chapter 5. Also, research design and the used data are introduced to the reader. In addition, the potential flaws and threats of the research data are considered briefly.

In chapter 6, the hypotheses are tested as the EU citizens views on Spitzenkandidaten process are analyzed. The results of ordinal regression analysis is presented.

Chapter 7 concludes the research as the main findings are presented. In addition, suggestions for future research are proposed. In the conclusion chapter, the role of political awareness is emphasized as one of key elements to focus on when combating the democratic deficit in the European Union.

2. PUBLIC OPIONIN ON THE EU

To be able to analyze relation between the EU-citizens *views* on the EU and EU-citizens *attitudes* on the Spitzenkanditen process, we first take a closer look on the theories how the EU citizens' views and public opinion are formed. This chapter draws together findings of the earlier research and discussions on the factors that effect in the background when the public opinion on the EU is formed among its citizens. In the chapter political awareness is introduced as a basis for political activity. In addition, political trust and political legitimacy are emphasized notably important factors influencing the voters' minds when forming their opinion on the European Union. First, the two dimensional nature of EU debates is introduced.

2.1. Two dimensional nature of EU debates

As introduced, the Spitzenkandidaten process was hoped to personalize the distant Brussels bureaucracy, strengthen the European element in the campaigns (Hobolt 2014: 3) and to increase the turnout of the elections as well as to increase the legitimacy of the European institutions (Thomassen 2016: 544). The public opinion on the Spitzenkandidaten process is the main topic of interest to study in this research as responsiveness to public opinion is widely considered as one of the core elements of democracy (Bølstad 2015: 23). Political parties tend to adapt their positions to the change in public opinion (Suhonen 1996: 36; Toshkov 2011: 171).

Representative democracy is largely based on the principle where the citizens delegate the practical political decision-making for their elected representatives. This way, ordinary citizens do not necessarily need to form their own opinion on all political issues. Ideally, the decision to vote should be based on at least basic level of information on the political differences between political parties and the functioning of the political system. (Grönlund 2009: 175; Rapeli & Leino 2013: 4.) Trust is a crucial element to democracy as it links citizens to the institutions that are intended to represent them (Mishler & Rose 2001: 30).

The ideological structures of voters' preferences over policy is used to define political space. These structures are important in order to understand two aspect of the European integration; First, the arguments on the existence of democratic deficit and the lack of strong European identity and second, the development of current and proposed institutional reforms, which make the European electorates' role increasingly important in structuring political competition in the European Union. (Gabel & Anderson 2004: 13 – 14.) As argued in the earlier studies *“EU debates are conducted on what is largely a two-dimensional basis: pro-EU or anti-EU, and left versus right.”* (Fratescu 2015: 108).

The EU-citizens *views on the EU* and the influence the views on the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process is studied in this thesis by answering the first research question of this thesis:

1) To what extent the attitudes towards the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?

European integration can be supported by both sides of the political scale, from the left and from the right. The level of support depends on the context, for example *“the left favors more integration in employment policy, while the right favors market integration.”* (Marks 2004: 241.) More electorates may be *“pulled toward party choice they would not have made on the basis of left/right concerns”* as the EU matters become politicized, but the left/right dimension will certainly retain its dominance as it subsumes a great variety of issues (van der Eijk & Franklin 2004: 47 – 50).

Steenbergen and Marks (2004: 7) summarize that *“four possible dichotomous alternatives – left/more integration, left/less integration, right/more integration, and right/less integration – are all feasible policy positions, and are like to be pursued by different forces.”* The expected impact of EU decision making on policies electorates consider important has systematic effect on the relationship between ideology and support for EU decision making among the voters (Ray 2004: 51). As the resources and values are

allocated between *functional* groups on the left/right dimension, the resources and values are allocated between *territorial* groups on the national sovereignty dimension. In the context of support for European integration social classes and political parties are internally divided. (Steenbergen & Marks 2004: 6.)

When studying left-right-dimension it is important to define ideological differences between political left and political right. Political parties are founded mainly to solve the social problems faced by individual or group of individuals or to foster social objectives of individual or group of individuals (Benrdtson 2004: 179 – 180).

Parties on the political left tend to support social changes, whereas parties on the political right tend to support conservatism. The political right tend to favor a smaller regulative role for government than the left (Reunanen & Suhonen 2007: 328.) Although the left and the right still structure the political field in Europe, structural changes and modern political problems have reduced the differences between the political left and right (Pesonen, Sänkiäho & Borg 1993: 128). The influence of political orientation on the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process is taken into account by studying the second research question of this thesis:

2) To what extent the position on the scale of political left and political right explains the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union?

Issues concerning about economic and physical security (materialist values) and issues concerning about human rights, the environmental and quality of life (post materialist values) are considered to be top two priorities of the citizens in the European Union. According to the *utilitarian perspective*, electorates evaluate the integration process by its costs and benefits, on national and individual levels. For example, citizens with higher incomes, better education and higher occupational skills tend to be more supportive of further integration. Those electorates who have positive expectations about their personal financial situation are more likely to support the integration in the EU compared to the electorates who have negative expectations about the near future. (Balestrini 2012: 372.)

On the national level, public support will be higher in countries that “*profit directly from net fiscal transfers from the EU or indirectly from improved trade and favourable economic conditions*” (Hobolt 2014 b: 666). From this perspective, the legitimacy of the European Union and its institutions is formed more on its effectiveness than their formal democratic characteristics (Thomassen 2016: 550). In contrast, “*affective*” support for integration is based on an “*ideological or non-material belief in the value of the political system.*”(Hix 1999: 138).

Balestrini (2012: 373 – 380) argues that exclusive or inclusive national identity is a more important factor to explain the level of support on the EU than economic utilitarianism as *national identity and sovereignty* is considered to be threatened in the process of further European integration among some of the electorates and decreases the support for of the Union. The self-categorization of electorates as members of their national and supranational reference groups is considered particularly contributing factor on attitudes in the context of integration (Vössing 2015: 160).

The decreasing turnout is considered to parallel with the declining support for European integration (Hix & Marsh 2007: 496). The politicization of the European integration in the European Parliament elections gives the electorates who are unhappy with the performance of the European Union or with European integration as such a way to impress their views (Thomassen 2016: 550), but according to Iso-Markku (2016) Eurosceptic groups have hardly any power in the European Parliament, although the size and visibility of these groups have increased after the 2014 elections. Eurosceptic groups are internally fragmented and the traditional parties of the Parliament have marginalized them from the practical work. However, EU-critical parties play a significant role in public opinion instructors as they are able to seize the growing skepticism in citizens' attitudes towards the EU (Wass 2014: 32).

2.2. Influence of political awareness and political trust

The importance of political awareness as a basis for political activity, such as voting, is emphasized in particular in the theoretical tradition of rational choice theories which

emphasize the comparison between the costs and the benefits gained through actions. According to these theories, individual tend to choose the alternative that will benefit person as an individual the most. Voting is different from many purely individual choices because voting is also a collective activity. The results of the elections are collective because one vote does not usually determinate result of the elections. (Grönlund 2009: 190.)

Political awareness has at least two dimensions. Political awareness is related to the rules of political decision-making, for example, in democracy, the institutions' power and responsibility relations. On the other hand, political awareness refers to citizens' understanding of the differences between policy makers, for example parties and politicians and their positions on topical political issues. (Grönlund 2009: 175.)

The *objective level of political awareness* can be measured by operating some kind of policy quiz in the context of a survey, for example the researchers ask questions about the rules of political system. Political awareness is often measured indirectly by so-called indicators of *internal political efficacy*. Internal efficacy refers the citizen's own perception of how well he/she understands politics and is able to influence into it.

External efficacy means that citizens feel the political system to listen to them and to act in accordance with their expectations. The research instruments for *subjective* internal efficacy has been more harmonized across different countries than the instruments aiming at mapping *objective* internal efficacy. There are differences in the level of political awareness among different countries and “*even when people are not extensively informed about the details involved in governing the Union, they use the shortcuts they know to make sense of EU policy issues.*” (Gabel & Anderson 2004: 30). For example, in the United Kingdom and France, the average political awareness of citizens has been considered weak. In the Nordic countries, the level of political awareness of citizens seems better. (Grönlund 2009: 177 - 178.)

The influence of political awareness on the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process is taken into account by studying the third research question of this thesis:

3) *To what extent the level of awareness about the processes of decision making in the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?*

Public administration tend to use so-called “hard indicators” (like e.g. resources and output) to observe their performance, but attention for accountability demands focusing on “soft indicators” (Bouckaert & Van de Walle 2003: 1). Political trust and political legitimacy are, based on earlier research (Stoeckel 2012, Hobolt and Wratil 2015, Thomassen 2016), notably important factors influencing the voters' minds when forming their opinion on the European Union. The presence or absence of trust determinates whether there will be co-operation or polarization. (Mishler & Rose 2001: 30.)

Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003: 4) argue that as “*satisfaction depends on sympathy for what the agency does (mission), and whether one thinks what agency is doing is good for society*”, trust serves a more general indicator as “*levels of trust in government may even be entirely unrelated with what government is or does.*”

When studying political legitimacy it is necessary to distinguish two levels: citizens' attitude towards the entire political system and the political system's outputs. People may refuse, for example, a common foreign and security policy without questioning the integration project itself. (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 158.) Stoeckel (2012: 23) criticizes that when studying the public opinion in the European Union the dependent variable is often conceptualized as one-dimensional – “*as a continuum from low support to high support for the unification of Europe*” and argues that individual opinions are constructed as a result of both negative and positive images as the citizens do not view political issues and objects in an exclusively positive or negative way.

Hobolt and Wratil (2015: 238) conclude that further integration in the European Union depends more and more on public legitimacy. The ambivalence among the public opinions in Europe is a key aspect to study in order to understand the popularity of extreme right- or left-wing parties in European Parliament elections and the nature of public opinion on European integration (Stoeckel: 24).

As Stoeckel (2012: 39) points out trust in EU institutions turns electorates less negative and less ambivalent about the European Union and clarifies that this is especially the case among politically sophisticated citizens who have a high trust on the EU institutions and who are very much attached to Europe. Among the electorates lacking such an emotional involvement the ambivalence of the opinion on the EU tend to be more common.

Trust in the institutions of the EU and attachment to Europe decreases both ambivalence and indifference towards the European Union (Stoeckel: 40 – 41). Thomassen (2016: 544) argue that the dearth of trust among the voters was one central explanation for the rise of the Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament elections 2014.

Certain cultural-political bias always apply when studying trust attitudes. The level of trust and satisfaction does not always generate for “good governance” as for example authoritarian rulers often enjoy a high level of demonstrated public trust. For this reason, “trust and satisfaction indicators thus always have to be interpreted within their specific context” as the nature of trust is alterable. (Bouckaert & Van de Walle 2003: 5–9.)

The approach on whether trust is to be conceived as endogenous or exogenous to political institutions makes the main difference between the *institutional theories* and *cultural theories*. Cultural and institutional theories are not mutually exclusive. They can “*provide contrasting explanations of the origins of trust and different predictions about the prospect for democracy.*” Low level of positive trust for the new institutions is consistent with both cultural and institutional theories. (Mishler & Rose 2001: 32 – 55.)

From the perspective of institutional theories, political trust is taken as politically endogenous. Institutional trust is a consequence of institutional performance and it is rationally based. Institutions’ good performance generates trust and, by contrast, untrustworthy performance generates distrust and skepticism. Institutional theories on trust do not deny the effects of early-life cultural influences. Political socialization and institutional performance should exert very similar and reinforcing effects on trust in institu-

tions as political institutions persist and perform relatively consistently over successive generations. Institutional theories on trust assume that neither culture nor the past performance of institutions is deterministic. Institutional theories either deny the relationship interpersonal trust as a main source of trust in institutions “*or argue that the direction of causality runs in the opposite direction or in both directions simultaneously.*” (Mishler & Rose 2001: 31–36.)

Cultural theories on trust emphasize that trust in political institutions is exogenous as it “*originate outside the political sphere in long-standing and deeply seeded beliefs about people that are rooted in cultural norms and communicated through early-life socialization.*” Cultural theories accentuate “*the importance and durability of pre-political or early-life socialization reflecting individuals’ experiences with kin, peer group, and community, institutional theories emphasize adult learning based on more recent or contemporaneous experiences with the performance of political institutions.*” From this point of view, institutional trust is seen as an extension of interpersonal trust. According to cultural theories on trust, individuals who trust each other are more likely to cooperate with each other. Cultural theories highlight interpersonal trust as a main source of trust in institutions. (Mishler & Rose 2001: 31 – 53.)

Mishler and Rose (2001: 32) distinguish macro and micro variants within both cultural and institutional theories. Macro-cultural theories “*emphasize the homogenizing tendencies of national traditions and make little allowance for variation in trust among individuals within societies*”. Macro-institutional theories assume that the outputs of institutions, such as “*promoting growth, governing effectively, and avoiding corruption*”, determine individual responses. Micro-cultural theories observe the variation in individual socialization experiences as sources of significant variation in political trust within as well as between societies (Mishler & Rose 2001: 32.)

Both macro theories of trust, cultural and institutional, accentuate trust as a collective or group property broadly shared by all members of a society. By contrast, micro theories assume that “*trust varies among individuals within a society based on differences in socialization and social background, political and economic experiences, or individual*

perceptions and evaluations.” Micro-institutionalist theories regard that evaluations of performance reflect individual circumstances and values in addition to aggregate performance of government. For example in the case of unemployment the trust on political institutions may suffer. (Mishler & Rose 2001: 33–36.) Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003: 7) point out that the reasons for distrust in public institutions vary from low performance of public institutions to increased demands of the citizens.

The views of the citizens and the public opinion on Spitzenkandidaten process and its effects on the state of democracy within the EU is the main topic of interest in this thesis. The data used in this research will be analyzed by using the theoretical framework provided by the theories on public opinion introduced in this chapter.

This chapter drew together findings of the earlier research and discussions on the factors that effect in the background when the public opinion on the EU is formed among its citizens. The chapter introduced political awareness as a basis for political activity. In addition, political trust and political legitimacy were emphasized notably important factors influencing the voters’ minds when forming their opinion on the European Union. Also, the two dimensional nature of EU debates was introduced.

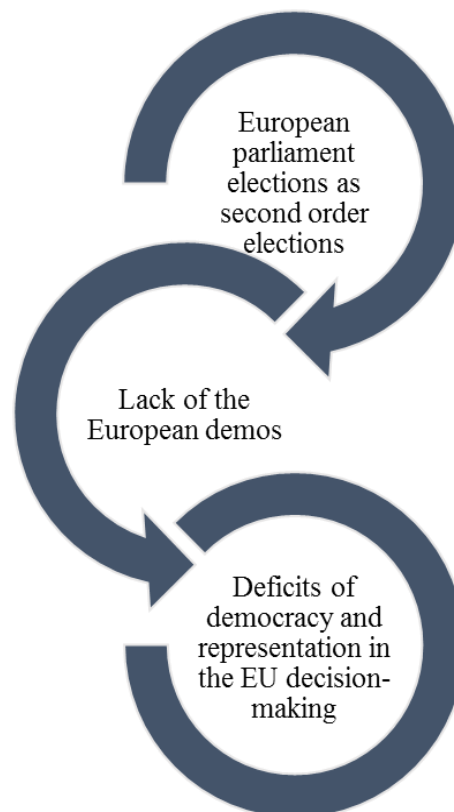
By studying the research questions from the perspectives introduced in this chapter, it is possible to perceive the paradox presented in introduction chapter: although the voter were “*more influential than ever*” in the European Parliament elections 2014, the European-wide turnout of the elections reached a new record low. In the next chapter, relying to the results of the earlier studies, three main explanations for the low European-wide turnout in the European parliament elections are introduced.

3. THE RECORD LOW EUROPEAN-WIDE TURNOUT

The thesis sheds light on European Union's attempts to increase the voting turn out and decrease the democratic deficit in the European Parliament elections by focusing especially on one of the most topical instrument: *Spitzenkandidaten process*. This chapter aims to set the concept of Spitzenkandidaten in the social context and guide the reader to understand the challenges the Spitzenkandidaten process was planned to tackle.

Three main explanations for the low European-wide turnout in the European parliament elections are introduced in this chapter; European parliament elections as second order elections, lack of European demos and deficits of democracy and representation in the EU decision-making. The explanations based on the earlier research ((ie. Raunio & Wiberg 1999 ; Hix & Marsh 2007 ; Thomassen 2016) are summarized in **figure 1**.

Figure 1: Three main explanations for the low European-wide turnout in the European parliament elections based on the earlier research



3.1. European parliament elections as second order elections

European parliament elections as an instrument of democratic accountability at the European level has been criticized not to work (Clark 2013: 339). Lack of “*truly European political parties competing for the votes of a European electorate on the basis of European issues*” is challenging the nature of the European Parliament elections as pan-European elections as the elections are “*fought by national political parties on national rather than European issues and decided by national electorates who make their choice on the basis of national rather than European issues.*” Therefore, the European Parliament Elections at least prior the 2014 elections are considered as second order elections in which national political issues are decisive for party choice at the cost of the European level political issues. In the other words the European Parliament Elections are considered as a sequel of national politics at a higher level. (Thomassen 2016: 545 – 554.)

Neither European Parliament elections nor the national elections cannot be defined as “European” elections as these elections are not about “*the personalities and parties at the European level or the direction of the EU policy agenda.*” If there is no “European” element in national and European elections, the risk that EU citizens’ preferences on issues on the EU policy agenda have only an indirect influence on EU policy outcomes, increases (Follesdal & Hix 2006: 536.) As second-degree elections, the result of the European Parliament elections characteristically does not directly affect the distribution of government responsibility (Wass 2014: 31), but the elections are considered as a “*mid-term contests in the battle to win national government office, and so voters primarily use these elections to punish governing parties.*” (Hix & Marsh 2007: 495).

European parliament elections have a lower turnout than in national elections, because rival political parties allocate fewer resources to the European parliament election campaigns and those who have right to vote in the elections have lower incentives to use their vote. European parliament elections do not have a direct impact on the formation of national government, but electorates may try use their vote to influence the policies of the existing or the next government. (Hix & Marsh 2007: 495.)

Thomassen (2016: 546) propose that the European Elections should be competed on the same topics that dominates decision-making in the European Parliament. Effective representation would require more emphasis on the left-right party dimension and less emphasis on the European integration dimension (*should there be more or less integration*) as the latter is “*causing a mismatch between the decision-making in the European Parliament and the electoral process.*”

Green parties and anti-EU parties tend to be more successful in European elections than they are in national elections (Hix & Marsh 2007: 495). The success of Eurosceptic parties in the 2014 elections is argued to be evidence of change in the elections’ nature in a sense that the voting decisions were not merely reflected by national considerations. The campaigns in the 2014 European Parliament election were strongly focused on the issues of integration. (Thomassen 546 – 554.)

The European Council has in recent years repeatedly sought to recall both the importance of the democratic legitimacy of decision-making and emphasized that accountability must apply on the same level at which decisions are taken and put into practice (Wass 2014: 30). One of the key objectives of the Lisbon Treaty was to clarify the institutional structure of the European Union and strengthen its position as a political actor. The role of the European Parliament was strengthened and European Union’s External Action Service was established.¹

3.2. Lack of the European demos

A demos is “*a group of people, the majority of whom feel sufficiently connected to each other to voluntarily commit to a democratic discourse and to a related decision-making process.*” (Cederman 2001: 224) and “*without demos, there is no confidence, recognition, solidarity, or reciprocal friendliness, which are all values that are essential for democratic coexistence*” as “*only a robust demos would make the obligations of justice acceptable*” (Innerarity 2014: 6).

¹ E 18/2016 vp.

“Shared beliefs, attitudes and practices that articulate universalistic principles” are prerequisite for democratic societies (Habermas 1998: 236). As identity and nationalist sentiment are largely based on the factors like language, culture and history, politicians and researchers have emphasized the rational side of EU citizenship.

A mutual advantage motivates cooperation (Bellamy & Kröger 2013: 483). Member States are all multi-party democracies and therefore certain common societal values such as democracy, freedom of expression and respect for human rights can be regarded to exist among the citizens of the EU (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 157), but as Ray (2004: 52) points out, the European nations are not homogeneous in their political, economic and social conditions. Instead of that EU would consist of one single demos – there has been suggestions that the Union has multiple demoi – both national and transnational. If so, their representation is guaranteed only through multiple channels of representation. (Bellamy & Kröger 2013: 484.)

Innerarity (2014: 5) argues that democratic deficit in the EU is not consequence of EU's institutional structures *“as much as a dearth of certain social, historic, and cultural conditions that cannot be created or modified in a brief period of time”* and suggests (2014: 17–18.) that European Union would gain its legitimization through shared practices, instead of institutional reforms.

3.3. Deficits of democracy and representation in the EU decision-making

The democratic deficit is considered as a shortfall of democracy. The concept of democratic deficit is used in a number of mutually exclusive meanings and it is repeated often like a mantra in the discussions on the development of European Union without bothering to define what is meant by the concept of democratic deficit in each case (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 156). Democratic deficit has no single meaning as its definitions are different as the backgrounds of the scholars or commentators who write on the subject have are different. The nationality, intellectual positions and preferred solutions vary (Follesdal & Hix 2006: 534.)

In the context of the European Union democratic deficit may refer to a number of factors, such as: 1) limited possibilities of the national parliaments to monitor the Union's decision-making, 2) status of the national actors and themes in European Parliament elections, 3) electorates weak representation in the Union as well as 4) the conflict of private and public interests as the result of increased role of interest groups in the decision-making. (Wass 2014: 29.)

As criticized by Hix (1999: 364) in the context of the European Union, the elite governing in the EU are forced to respond to public opinion only when issues become highly salient and therefore elites may have a temptation to keep issues off the political agenda. European integration has increased the power of executives and decreased the power of national parliaments as the design of the EU highlights the role of the executive actors: national ministers in the Council, and government appointees in the Commission. These actors are *“much more isolated from national parliamentary scrutiny and control than are national cabinet ministers or bureaucrats in the domestic policy-making process.”* (Follesdal & Hix 2006: 535.)

Thomassen (2016: 549) presents that effective electoral democracy meets three conditions: 1) Electorates must be able clearly to assign responsibility, 2) Electorate must be able to drive from power those they consider responsible for a policy they reject, and 3) to replace them by alternative government, a government in waiting, or a constructive opposition. Thomassen (2016: 549) criticize that at the EU-level the voter have no measure to hold anything or anybody accountable for European policies at the next election. A serious democratic deficit occurs *“since at the national level more and more voters are inclined to take into account their judgment of the incumbent government.”*

Thoskov criticizes (2011: 169) that EU lacks institutional mechanisms directly linking the public and EU policy-makers. Institutionally democratic deficit is considered as low power of the institutions directly elected by citizens - national parliaments and the European Parliament – in relation to other EU decision-making bodies, including the European Commission and the Council of Ministers (Raunio & Wiber 1999: 156). Proponents of the parliamentarization of the EU support the processes that strengthen the Eu-

ropean Parliament and the European parties and thereby enhance the link between citizens and their respective MEPs to dissolve the representation deficit (Bellamy & Kröger 2013: 487 – 488).

In the European Parliament elections, voters find themselves in a dual role as they represent a citizen of member state and a citizen of the European Union (Habermas 2017: 171). Citizens of the European Union are represented directly at Union level in the European Parliament, and on the other hand indirectly in the European Council which is composed of the Heads of States or Government or in the Council which is composed of representatives of the governments as the representatives are democratically accountable to the Member States' national Parliaments or to their citizens (Wass 2014: 31). This may lead in the conflict of interests as *“while the member state peoples strive for supra-national democracy, they have an interest in preserving their domestic structures of self-government.”*(Habermas 2017: 171). *“To respect democratic norms, a system of representation needs to offer a form of government that citizens can perceive to be both “of” and “for” the people.”*(Bellamy & Kröger 2013: 481). Therefore representation is especially one of the key elements to study when observing the EU's democratic legitimacy.

Bellamy and Kröger define two main forms of representation deficits in the EU level; 1) Elitist deficit, which arises when *“popular views are under-represented because elites either only represent their own interests or those of small but influential groups, such as bankers.”* 2) Populist deficit, which arises *“when unpopular views – of minorities or of expertise – are under-represented.”* (Bellamy & Kröger 2013: 481.) Political explanations can be used by political elites to modify public opinion about European integration, but *“the success of their persuasive efforts depends on individual configurations of national and European identities”*(Vössing 2015:157).

If no representatives is found to reflect equal concern and respect for voters' views and interests, or voter representatives fail to promote policies that advance them on an equal basis, a representation deficit occurs (Bellamy & Kröger 2013: 481). Also if ideologies and goals of the main parties are quite similar, it is difficult for the public to distinguish

between parties (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 161). Thomassen (2016: 546) defines the European Parliament elections as effective instrument of democracy only if “*likeminded political parties form cohesive and disciplined party groups and voters across Europe vote for similar reasons for similar parties.*”

Different approaches to reduce the democratic deficit have been considered and introduced by researchers along the years of the Union’s history. Raunio and Wiberg (1999) introduce four problem based approaches on the EU’s democratic deficit in the context of decision making. From the *state centric approach* basic problem causing democratic deficit is the distance between the EU’s institutions and its’ citizens and lack of democratic control of the EU institutions. National parliaments should be responsible for control and surveillance of the decision-making, because only they - and not the European Parliament - , are able to anchor of public opinion into the EU decision-making.

From the *parliamentary approach* basic problem causing democratic deficit is the lack of control of the national governments and councils. Democratic decision-making system should be strengthened by improving the roles of parliaments in the Member States and the role of the European Parliament. (ibid 1999.)

The *party centric approach* is an advanced version of a parliamentary approach. It considers that the democratic deficit is primarily due to the absence of Commission which would be responsible for the Parliament. In the model, the EU can be considered democratic only if the European parliament elections is run by the actual European political parties which offer alternative policy options for the citizens of the Union and the winner political parties form a government and government parties execute the platforms. (ibid 1999.)

In the *president centric approach* the Commission has a key role. In the model, the Commission President would be selected through direct elections for the post of President of the Union as the elections on the President of the Commission would take place simultaneously with the European Parliament elections. Each European parliament party would set its own candidate. Proponents of this approach emphasize that the elections

would align the relationship between the Commission and citizens as the president would be familiar to a person through the Union. At the same time Parliament's political groups would aim to institutional coherence: the political parties represented in the Commission would support the government and the opposition parties would try their best to challenge the views of the Commission. (ibid 1999.)

In 2009, the Treaty of Lisbon aimed to increase the legitimacy of the decision-making process. The European Parliament elections are seen as an essential measure to bring the decision-making of the Union closer to its citizens. (Wass 2014: 29.) We take now a closer look at one of the instruments introduced in the Treaty, the instrument that was designed to tackle the democratic deficit: *Spitzenkandidaten process*.

4. THE IMPACT OF SPITZENKANDIDATEN PROCESS

By closely studying one concrete example of the EU's attempts to decrease the democratic deficit in its decision making, the *Spitzenkandidaten process*, this thesis has shed light into variety of reasons behind the paradox presented in the introduction chapter: although the voter were "more influential than ever" in the European Parliament elections 2014, the European-wide turnout of the elections reached a new record low.

The process is considered as one more institutional attempt in the Union's history combating deficits of democracy and representation in the EU decision-making. As the findings of this research emphasize the role of political awareness as one of key elements to focus on when combating the democratic deficit in the European Union, in this chapter, the reader is introduced briefly into the core idea behind Spitzenkandidaten process and its impacts on the interinstitutional relations and EU party politics. As stated earlier, the process had a little impact on the turnout, but the process and its consequences are one step in the ever-going rival for power in the European Union between supranational institutions and the member states (Deckram 2016: 1).

4.1 The impacts on the interinstitutional relations

The new role of the European Parliament after the Lisbon treaty highlighted the importance of the European Parliament elections 2014 when compared to the earlier elections (European Parliament 2014). In the Lisbon Treaty the European Parliament's power was enhanced through the use of so-called ordinary legislative procedure and by raising it as an equally important actor with the Council on the adoption of the EU budget (Wass 2014: 31). Furthermore, the process of Spitzenkandidaten was implemented for the first time in the European Parliament elections 2014.

As said, on the process, European-level parties had proposed rival candidates, the so called Spitzenkandidaten (lead candidates), to run for the president of the Commission prior to the elections (Hobolt 2014: 2). The President of "*European Commission, the*

EU's executive body, which initiates legislation and supervises its implementation” (European Parliament 2014) was determined by taking into account the results of the European Parliament elections as the lead candidate of the winning party was nominated for the president of the Commission. Prior the elections in 2014, the President of the Commission was chosen by a consensus of European leaders in the European Council which was approved by the European Parliament (Hobolt 2014: 3).

Spitzenkandidaten process was hoped to personalize the distant Brussels bureaucracy, strengthen the European element in the campaigns and *“thereby increase interests and participation in European democracy”* (Hobolt 2014: 3) and *“to increase the legitimacy of the European institutions by strengthening the electoral connection between the voters and the European Commission”* (Thomassen 2016: 544).

Since the mid- 1980s, reforms of the EU treaties have given more power to the European Parliament (Follesdal & Hix 2006: 535). The European Parliament is nowadays considered to be one of the most powerful parliaments in the world (Thomassen 2016: 547). Role of the European Parliament and the Commission, and in particular the relationship between the leaders of these two institutions in the EU has been strengthened after the European Parliament elections was connected to election of the President of the Commission in accordance with the treaty of Lisbon, but in times of crisis the European Union's political agenda remains firmly in hands of the Member States and the European Council. For this reason it is difficult for the European parliament *“to take advantage of its closer relationship with the Commission, as the latter acts very cautiously.”* In addition, the close relationship between Parliament and the Commission leaders may strengthen the monolithic image of the EU’s decision making to the public. (Iso-Markku 2016.) As the European Parliament has become *“the centre of inter-organisational negotiations in all policy areas”* Héritier and Reh (2012: 1154) point out the challenges of institutional legitimacy like the risk of loss of open parliamentary debate and marginalization of MEPs from small political groups. As Hobolt (2014: 3) argues *“while the Spitzenkandidaten played a limited role in the determining the composition of the European Parliament, this constitutional experiment nonetheless has important implications for inter-institutional dynamics in the Union, and in the long term*

may even reshape the nature of European elections.” Thomassen (2016: 549) criticizes that the Spitzenkandidaten process does not improve electoral accountability as it would require voters’ awareness of party identity of the candidates and in a current form it still is impossible for voter *“even to identify which political parties and party groups are responsible for policies initiated by the Commission.”*

The reform is not automatically fully supported by all the institutions. Still, in the spring 2018, the Spitzenkandidaten process is still under consideration on the EU level. The discussions whether the reform should be applied also in the future elections when the new parliament and the new President for Commission will be elected continue. According to the European Commission, the 2014 experiment should be continued and developed. The Commission highlights the need to continue the open debate for the best possible process (Euroopan komissio 2018: 4). The European Parliament has expressed that Parliament is not ready to support those candidates for the presidency of the Commission who have not been nominated as the Spitzenkandidaten, lead candidate, for the 2019 elections (Euroopan parlamentti 2018). The European Council has stated that it cannot give up its right to propose a nominee for the President of the Commission, unless the Treaty is amended (Eurooppa-neuvosto 2018) as member states still are not convinced by the lead candidate process (Russack 2018).

4.2. The impacts on the EU party politics

EU differs from the domestic democratic institutions that citizens are used to. This may have psychological consequences as there occurs a risk that citizens are not able to understand the EU, *“and so will never be able to assess and regard it as a democratic system writ large, nor to identify with it.”* (Follesdal & Hix 2006: 536). Euro-parties are not an arbitrary groupings of national parties. They aim to influence the behavior of their members and shape the agenda of EU politics (Gabel & Hix 2002: 954.)

Thomassen (2016: 547) argues that Spitzenkandidaten process failed to connect the will of the European electorate to European public policy as the process dearth the connection on the left-right dimension as the campaigns of the lead candidates led to polariza-

tion of the European integration dimension and had a little focus on the left-right dimension. According to Thomassen (2016: 547) more attention should be put on left-right dimension as the dimension clearly affects in the decision-making process in the European Parliament. Wass (2014: 32) argues that one significant factor for voters' low motivation to vote and participate is that voter' may lack alternatives, in particular when the candidate is desired to combine the left-right and integration dimension.

As criticized by Braun and Popa (2018: 4) the political parties did not put effort to explain idea behind the Spitzenkandidaten process to their voters as political debates - initiated by the political parties - on the issue were rare. Emphasising the Spitzenkandidaten a political topic was not seen strategically advantageous from a perspective of political parties.

Christiansen (2016: 992) argues that the lead candidate process did not fostered new opportunities for party political competition, but further strengthened the long-standing "gran coalition" in the European Parliament. The Parliament's and the Commission's relationship is closely linked in the actions of the "gran coalition" formed by the two largest groups in the EP (Iso-Markku 2016.)

Thomassen (2016: 550) argues that *"as issues of European unification are becoming more important in European elections, this only leads to a mismatch between the dimensions of conflict in the electoral process and the relevant dimensions of conflict in the European parliament"* as the decisions on (further) European integration are not decided by the European Parliament, but under the intergovernmental regime by national government, and therefore the connection between the citizens' policy preferences and legislative decision-making remains weak in the integration policy issues.

When parties are reviewed on the left-right dimension EU-critical parties are placed on the edges of left and right as the pro-EU parties are placed in the middle. Therefore, if any of the major parties would sue its rival by changing their attitude towards the Union less eager than earlier, the coalition formation would require far alliances with atypical partners (Wass 2014: 31 – 32).

Thomassen (2016: 550) warns that if Eurosceptic electorates or their representatives in the European parliament are excluded more or less permanently from power would that most likely lead to a decrease of the legitimacy of the whole political system. The close cooperation between the political groups are designed to ensure the functionality of the European Parliament, but may also may strengthen the monolithic image of the EU's decision making to the public (Iso-Markku 2016).

Theory part of this thesis aimed to introduce the reader what Spitzenkandidaten process is and why it was implemented in the first place. The process is expounded as European Union's attempt to increase the voting turn out and decrease the democratic deficit in the European Parliament elections.

In this thesis, the views of the citizens and the public opinion on Spitzenkandidaten process and its effects on the state of democracy within the EU is the main topic of interest. The theories of earlier research introduced in this chapter and in the two previous chapters are applied and tested by studying hypothesis presented in the next chapter. Next, the data, hypothesis and research design are introduced to the reader.

5. DATA, HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This research aims to take a closer look on the EU citizens' views and public opinion on the Spitzenkandidaten process. In this chapter data, hypothesis and research design are introduced to the reader. Also the potential flaws and threats of the research data are considered.

5.1. Data

The European Parliament regularly orders surveys on public opinion among the citizens of the Union in the Member States (European Parliament 2014 b). The surveys conducted to cover a broad range of issues. They focus primarily on the European citizens' knowledge of the European Parliament, on the perceptions of the EU and its main challenges among the citizens of the Union, their beliefs and views on the European elections, the European Parliament and the European integration in general. The analysis of the results of these surveys aim to ensure *“the most complete overview of national evolutions, regional specificities, as well as socio-demographic differences and historical trends.”* (European Parliament 2014 b.)

The data studied in this thesis contains the data set of the Parlemeter of the European Parliament (EB/EP 82.4) conducted face-to-face by TNS opinion, in the 28 Member States, among 27801 EU citizens aged 15 and over. The fieldwork of the Parlameter study took place between 29 November and 9 December 2014. It is good to be aware of the context in which the survey was conducted. In this case, as the fieldwork actually took place in the weeks following the inauguration of the Juncker Commission, the data set of the Parlamenter study is most certainly interesting source of data for this thesis and further analysis.

The Parlemeter consists three sections. The first section focus to measure Europeans' perceptions of the European parliament, its image, its role and the knowledge of it among the citizens in the Member States. The second section in the survey *“asks questions about identity, EU membership but also the voice European citizens feel they*

have within the EU and the election of the President of the European Commission.” The final section of the survey aims to measure whether or not the citizens of the Union felt that the EU had added value to a list of 15 different broad topics varying for example from agriculture to immigration and from employment to gender equality. This section was conducted for the first time (European Parliament Eurobarometer (EB/EP 82.4) 2014 Parlemeter 2015.)

5.2. Methods

By using quantitative research researcher often aims to construct, explain, reform, dismantle or clarify previous theories and theoretical concepts (Vilkka 2017: 25). The data used in this study was processed and analyzed with SPSS version 24 (SPSS Inc., Chicago IL). As an analytical method the ordinal regression analysis was used in this research. Ordinary regression analysis, as the name suggests, is suitable for analyzing ordinal variables (Sarpila, Pajunen, Kekäläinen & Åberg 2017: 90) and is relatively new method developed for analyzing ranked outcomes (Scott, Goldber, Mayo 1997: 1)

Ordinal regression analysis is suitable method in this research as it has a assumption that *“the response variable behaves in an ordinal fashion with respect to each predictor”* (Harrell 2015: 312). Ordinal regression model analyzes whether the results change if different factors are standardized. The model does not calculate individual probabilities, but cumulative probabilities of events.

Unlike linear models, ordinal regression analysis makes assumptions only for the *order* between the values of the variable to be explained, not the *distances* between values of the variable to be explained. Therefore, the analysis does not require the assumption that the distance on the scale would be the same between values. For example, there is no assumption that the distance between "not very important" and "neutral" would be the same as "neutral" and "important". (Sarpila et al. 2017: 90.)

The statistical significance refers to the probability that the researcher accepts the existence of a link between the variables in the research material. The reliability of the statistical test is reported as 95%, 99% and 99.9% significance levels. For example, the

95% level means that there is only 5% chance that the linkage found in the sample is not a real phenomenon in the population (Tilastokeskus 2018).

Reliability estimates the stability of the results from the measurement to another and highlights the repeatability of the study. Research is reliable and accurate when exactly the same results are obtained regardless of the researcher when the study is repeated. Validation of research means the ability of a research to measure what the research was meant to measure. Researcher's ability to operationalize the theoretical concepts into everyday language plays important role. The theory used in the study, concepts and a set of ideas, shall be passed in the forms used in the study. The validity of the study is in a good level if the systematic errors are missing and researcher has been able to use the concepts systematically through the study. (Vilkka 2017: 149 - 150.)

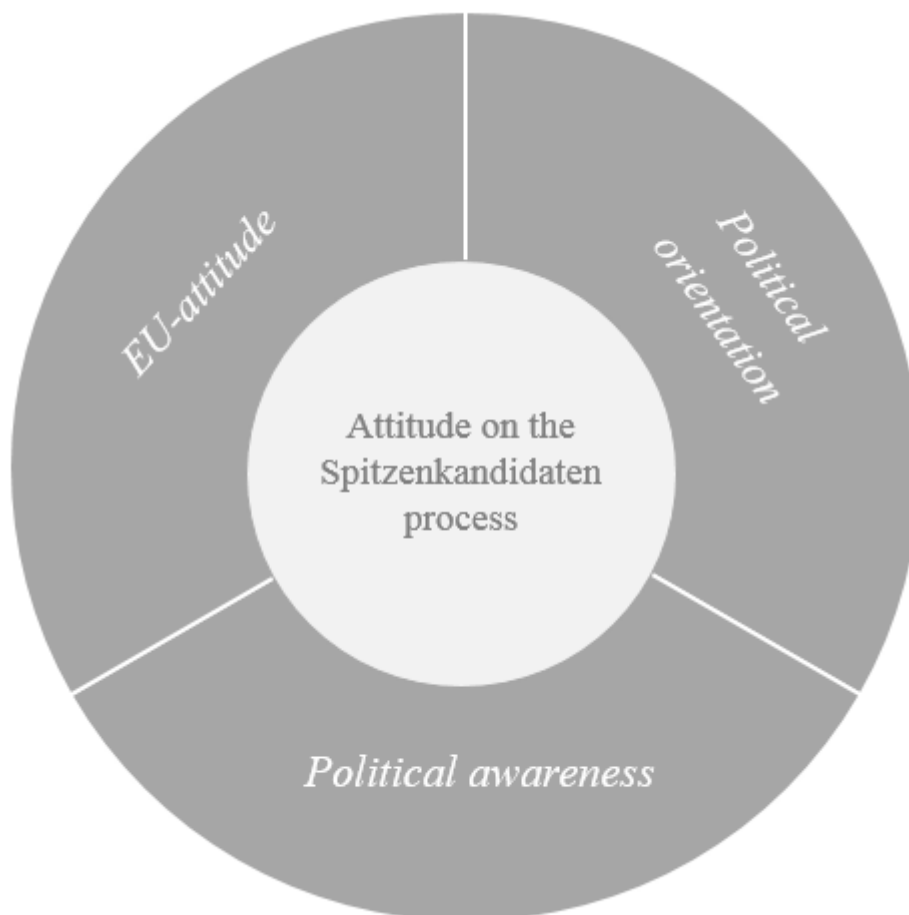
5.3. Hypothesis

In quantitative research researcher poses a research problem, which is set as a hypothesis. The hypothesis is expressed in terms of an argument. Hypotheses are not arbitrary arguments of what the researcher assumes would be the relationship or difference between things. The *theoretical hypothesis* is rationalized on previous studies, theories and models. *Empirical hypothesis* is based on researcher's experiences and observations. In any case, hypotheses are always justified (Vilkka 2017: 24.) As the hypotheses presented in this thesis are justified by the previous studies, this thesis has theoretical approach on its hypotheses.

The survey data contains 1) variable measuring citizens' attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process as a measure to progress democracy within the EU, 2) variable measuring citizens' position on the scale of political left and political right, the political orientation, and 3) variables measuring the level of citizens' awareness about the decision making process in the European Union. Therefore the data set of the Parlemeter of the European Parliament (EB/EP 82.4) has potential to give answers when the hypotheses are tested.

This research has three hypothesis. First hypothesis, *EU-attitude dimension*, examines citizens' polarized attitudes towards the European Union. Second hypothesis, *Political orientation dimension*, examines more closely citizens' position on the scale of political left and political right. Third hypothesis, *Political awareness dimension*, examines the level of awareness about the processes of decision making in the European Union among the citizens of the Union. Based on the findings of the previous research (Thomassen 2016, Frantescu 2015, Popa, Rohrschneider & Schmitt 2015, Wass 2014, Stoeckel 2012, Gabel & Anderson 2004) these three dimensions were considered important to focus on in this research. The dimensions are presented in the **figure 2**.

Figure 2: Three dimensions studied



5.3.1. H₁ – EU-attitude dimension

The Spitzenkandidaten process was applied first time after the European Parliament elections were held in the difficult political climate. The Eurozone crisis had polarized opinions about the direction of European integration across the member states. (Christiansen 2016: 992.)

Also Spitzenkandidaten process itself has been criticized that it made Eurosceptical voters became even more skeptical, and the other way around (Thomassen 2016: 545). It has been argued by Popa, Rohrschneider and Schmitt (2015: 46) that the presence of the lead candidates in the European Parliament elections 2014 polarized the European public as *“those who support the EU believe the EU has become more democratic as a result of the leading candidates. But those who generally view the EU skeptically oppose it even more when they are aware of the presence of pro-EU candidates.”* These earlier findings by Popa, Rohrschneider and Schmitt (2015) and argument by Thomassen (2016) are studied further and tested by answering the first research question of this thesis: *To what extent the polarized attitudes towards the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens’ of the Union?*

The question is further studied by testing hypothesis based on the earlier research:

H₁: Citizens with positive attitude towards the European Union consider the Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy more likely than the citizens with negative attitude towards the European Union.

There are many questions measuring respondent’s attitude towards the EU from different perspectives, but two questions of Parlemeter 2014 were considered to measure respondent’s *general attitude* towards the EU:

1. ***“QP13: Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)’s membership of the EU is...?”*** (A good thing; A bad thing; Neither a good thing nor a bad thing; Don’t know)

2. ***“D75: In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly negative, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?”*** (Very positive; Fairly positive; Neutral; Fairly negative; Very negative; Don’t know)

The answers were coded to be able to form the EU-attitude variables: *Attitude towards the EU membership* and *Image on the EU*. The better thing the respondent considered his/her country’s membership of the EU to be, the higher score he/she got. The more positive thing the respondent considered the EU to conjure up for him/herself, the higher score he/she got. Don’t knows were referred as missing values.

5.3.2. H₂ – Political orientation dimension

One significant factor for voters’ low motivation to vote and participate is that voter may lack alternatives, in particular when the candidate is desired to combine the left-right and integration dimension (Wass 2014: 32). Frantescu (2015: 108) points out that *“EU debates are conducted on what is largely a two-dimensional basis: pro-EU or anti-EU, and left versus right.”* European integration can be supported by both sides of the political scale, from the left and from the right. The level of support depends on the context, for example *“the left favors more integration in employment policy, while the right favors market integration.”* (Marks 2004: 241.)

It has been criticized that the Spitzenkandidaten process failed to connect the will of the European electorate to European public policy as the process dearth the connection on the left-right dimension as the campaigns of the lead candidates led to polarization of the European integration dimension and had a little focus on the left-right dimension. More attention should be put on left-right dimension as the dimension clearly effects in the decision-making process in the European Parliament. (Thomassen 2016: 547.)

Based on these earlier arguments by Thomassen (2016), Frantescu (2015), Wass (2014) and Marks (2004) relation between the citizens' political orientation and their attitude towards the Spitzenkandidaten process is studied by answering the second research question of this thesis: *To what extent the position on the scale of political "left" and "right" explains the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union?*

The question is further studied by testing hypothesis:

H₂: The citizens' position on the scale of political "left" and "right" does not explain significantly the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union.

In the Parlemeter 2014 the question measuring the respondent's position on the scale of political "left" and "right" was form as following:

1. "D1.: In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". How would you place your views on this scale? (1 Left – 10 Right; Refusal; Don't know)

The answers were coded to be able to form the *Political orientation variable*: The more right the respondent placed his/her views on the scale, the higher score he/she got. Don't knows and refusals were referred as missing values.

5.3.3. H₃ – Political awareness dimension

"Even when people are not extensively informed about the details involved in governing the Union, they use the shortcuts they know to make sense of EU policy issues." (Gabel & Anderson 2004: 30). Trust in EU institutions turns electorates less negative and less ambivalent about the European Union and clarifies that this is especially the case among politically sophisticated citizens who are very much attached to Europe (Stoeckel 2012: 39).

According to Thomassen (2016: 549) the Spitzenkandidaten process does not improve electoral accountability as it would require voters' awareness of party identity of the candidates. Thomassen argues that in a current form it still is impossible for voter "*even to identify which political parties and party groups are responsible for policies initiated by the Commission.*" The importance of political awareness is considered as a basis for political activity (Grönlund 2009: 190).

Based on these earlier arguments by Thomassen (2016), Stoeckel (2012) and Gabel and Anderson (2004) the citizens' political awareness on the processes of decision making in the EU is studied by answering the third research question of this thesis: *To what extent the level of awareness about the decision making in the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?*

The question is further studied by testing hypothesis:

H₃: Citizens who have a high level of awareness on the processes of decision making in the EU consider Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy more likely than the rest of the citizens.

As argued earlier, the *objective level of political awareness* can be measured by operating some kind of policy quiz in the context of a survey. *Internal efficacy* refers the citizen's own perception of how well he/she understands politics and is able to influence into it. In this research two variables were formed to be able to measure *objective level of political awareness* and *internal political efficacy*.

The objective level of political awareness was measured in the Parlemeter 2014 by operating a short policy quiz including four true or false statements (*=correct answers):

1. "QP4.1.: The members of the European Parliament are directly elected by the citizens of each Member State" (True*; False; Don't know)

2. ***“QP4.2.: The EU’s budget is determined jointly by the European Parliament and the Member States”*** (True*; False; Don’t know)

3. ***“QP 4.3.: At the EU level, European laws (directives and regulations) have to be agreed jointly by the European Parliament and the Member States”***
(True*; False; Don’t know)

4. ***“QP 4.4.: Each Member State has the same number of Members of the European Parliament.”*** (True; False*; Don’t know)

The answers were coded to be able to form *the variable of the objective level of political-awareness*: The correct answers was coded as 1 and the rest as 0. Each correct answer increased the respondent's objective political awareness level by one point. The points obtained were counted together to form the actual variable.

In the Parlemeter 2014 the question measuring the internal efficacy was form as following:

“QP3: In general, do you consider that you are very well, fairly well, fairly badly or very badly informed about the European Parliament’s activities?”

(Very well informed, Fairly well informed, Fairly badly informed, Very badly informed, Don’t know)

The answers were coded to be able to form *the variable of internal efficacy*: The better the respondent considered him/herself to be informed, the higher score he/she got.

5.4. Demographic background factors

Respondent’s gender and respondent’s age were determined as demographic background factors in this research. In addition, whether the respondent was in a working

life, the age respondent had completed a full-time education and whether the respondent was living in rural area or village, in small or middle sized town or in a large town at the time of the survey taking place, was taken into a consideration.

It is worth mentioning at this point, that voting age in all Member States is 18 years, except in Austria where the voting age is 16 years. Voting is mandatory in four Member States (Belgium, Greece, Cyprus and Luxembourg) (European Parliament 2017.) The data studied in this thesis contains the data set of the Parlemeter of the European Parliament (EB/EP 82.4) conducted face-to-face by TNS opinion, in the 28 Member States, among 27801 EU citizens aged 15 and over. Therefore, all the respondents of the survey were not able to vote in the elections of 2014 due their young age. But as this research is interested about the views of the *citizens* of the EU, also the answers of these respondents were taking into account. In the next European Parliament elections 2019 all the respondents taking part in the Parlemeter 2014 will be old enough to vote.

5.5. Potential threats of the research

The opinions of electorates are formed mainly by domestic politics and its direction in the individual countries among the Member States and “the substantial debates at any given moment are also very important” (Kaniok 2012: 21). The data used in the study represents one instantaneous moment and therefore the study is a cross-sectional analysis by its nature. On the other hand, in this case, as the fieldwork actually took place in the weeks following the inauguration of the Juncker Commission, the data set of the Parlamenter study is most certainly interesting source of data for this thesis and further analysis.

In addition, it should be borne in mind that different definitions such as trust may vary in different countries, political cultures and may differ over time. Citizens consequently determine level of trust in government and the criteria they use to evaluate their trust in public institutions change as “*what is an important consideration for one is not considered as important by others*”. That is why “*political systems are always based on a number of (constantly changing) choices between social and political dilemmas.*” (Bouckaert & Van de Walle 2003: 5–9.) On the other hand, as Mishler and Rose (2001:

34) explain that “*the institutionalization of trusting interactions within a culture creates a path-dependent process in which diffuse socialization mechanisms transmit, from one generation to the next, positive (or negative) predispositions toward representative institutions and democratic governance.*”

In the Parlemeter 2014 the left-right dimension has been measured by asking the respondents where they would locate themselves in the left-right scale, ranging from one to ten. When analyzing respondents' positioning, it should be kept in mind that the respondent can comprehend the extremes of the scale differently. For some, the value of 1 may represent the extreme left or the Left Alliance support, and the value 10 can mean the extreme right or the right wing of the Coalition Party. This is also case in any other Likert-scale survey questions.

6. CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVE – SPITZENKANDIDATEN PROCESS

This research aims to focus on the EU citizens' views and public opinion on the Spitzenkandidaten process. In this chapter, the theories and criticism of earlier research are applied and tested by studying three research questions.

As stated in the previous chapters, Spitzenkandidaten process has faced criticism among researchers. The process has been accused of making Eurosceptical voters became even more skeptical, and the other way around (Popa, Rohrschneider and Schmitt 2015: 46). It has been also criticized that the process failed to connect the will of the European electorate to European public policy as the process dearth the connection on the left-right dimension. In addition, the process is not seen to improve electoral accountability as it would require voters' awareness of party identity of the candidates. (Thomassen 2016: 545 - 549.) By taking into account the main criticism of the earlier studies, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1) To what extent the attitudes towards the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?

2) To what extent the position on the scale of political left and political right explains the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union?

3) To what extent the level of awareness about the processes of decision making in the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?

As analytical method the ordinal regression analysis was used in this research. In this chapter, the theories of earlier research are applied and tested by studying hypothesis presented in the previous chapter.

6.1. Observations on the background factors

Lack of European demos is introduced as one of the main explanations for the low European-wide turnout in the European parliament elections in this thesis. According to Habermas (1998: 236) “*Shared beliefs, attitudes and practices that articulate universalistic principles*” are prerequisite for democratic societies. As identity and nationalist sentiment are largely based on the factors like language, culture and history, politicians and researchers have emphasized the rational side of EU citizenship.

Raunio and Wiber (1999: 157) point out that Member States are all multi-party democracies and therefore certain common societal values such as democracy, freedom of expression and respect for human rights can be regarded to exist among the citizens of the EU. The European nations are not homogeneous in their political, economic and social conditions (Ray 2004: 52).

Respondent’s gender and respondent’s age were determined as demographic background factors in this research. In addition, whether the respondent was in a working life, the age respondent had completed a full-time education and whether the respondent was living in rural area or village, in small or middle sized town or in a large town at the time of the survey taking place, was taken into a consideration.

The frequencies and marginal percentage distribution of the respondents in the survey’s question “*Q18: Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: the election of the President and the European Commission as a whole by the European Parliament based on the results of the European elections represents significant progress for democracy within the EU?*” is presented in the **table 1**. The results of ordinal regression analysis is presented in the **table 2**.

Less than every tenth (8,6 %) of the respondents in the question were 15–24 year old, 21,3% 25-39 year old, 26% 40-54 year old and 44,2% 55 years or older during the survey conducted (table 1). Support for the statement that Spitzenkandidaten process represent progress for democracy decreases statistically significantly among younger respondents. The support for the statement is the strongest among the 55 year old and

older (table 2).

The age a person had completed a full time education have a statistically significant effect on whether the person consider Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy or not (table 2). The older respondent was when completing his/her full time education, the more supportive he/she was for the argument. This probably tells us about the respondent's level of education, but as the question was formatted: "*How old were you when you stopped full-time education?*" this is just an educated guess. 0,5% of the respondents in the question have not completed a full time education at all (table 1).

7,5 % of the respondents in the question told they were unemployed at the time of the survey conducted (table 1). Among the citizens who were not unemployed at the time of the survey taking place the support for the statement that Spitzenkandidaten process represent progress for democracy is statistically significantly higher than among those who were unemployed at the time of the survey taking place (table 2).

29,7 % of the respondents in the question lived in a rural areas or villages, 41,9 % lived in small/middle towns and 28,4% in large towns (table 1). Whether the respondent was living in rural area or village, in small or middle sized town or in a large town at the time of the survey taking place does not have a statistically significant effect on whether the person consider Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy or not (table 2).

48,8 % of the respondents in the question were men (table 1). Gender does not explain statistically significantly the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union (table 2). As seen already from the background factors of the respondents in the statement Q18, the backgrounds of the citizens of the EU are not homogeneous. It has been argued that EU would not consist of one single demos – there the Union has multiple demoi – both national and transnational. Bellamy & Kröger (2013: 484) argue that representation of the citizens of the EU is guaranteed only through multiple channels of representation.

Table 1: Background factors

<i>Statement Q18:</i> <i>Spitzenkandidaten process</i> represents significant progress for democracy		N	%
	Totally disagree	969	5,2 %
	Tend to disagree	2696	14,5 %
	Tend to agree	10898	58,7 %
	Totally agree	4007	21,6 %
Gender			
	Man	9055	48,8 %
	Woman	9515	51,2 %
Age			
	15 – 24 years	1588	8,6 %
	25 – 39 years	3951	21,3 %
	40 – 54 years	4823	26,0 %
	55 years and older	8208	44,2 %
Type of Community			
	Rural area or village	5519	29,7 %
	Small/Middle town	7773	41,9 %
	Large town	5278	28,4 %
Status			
	Employed	17168	92,5 %
	Unemployed	1402	7,5 %
Valid		18570	100 %
Missing		9231	
Total		27801	

Table 2: The results of ordinal regression analysis

	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
Attitude on membership	,449	,026	,000
Image on the EU	,656	,021	,000
Objective awareness	,112	,014	,000
Internal efficacy	,160	,021	,000
Political orientation (Left / Right)	,005	,006	,428
Age when stopped full-time education	,074	,021	,000
Gender: Man	-,028	,029	,339
Gender: Woman	0	-	-
Age: 15 – 24 years	-,250	,061	,000
Age: 25 – 39 years	-,188	,040	,000
Age: 40 – 54 years	-,151	,037	,000
Age: 55 years and older	0	-	-
Type of Community: Rural area or village	-,013	,039	,745
Type of Community: Small or middle sized town	-,015	,036	,673
Type of Community: Large town	0	-	-
Employed	,213	,056	,000
Unemployed	0	-	-
Nagelkerge			,191

6.2. Spitzenkandidaten process polarizing attitudes on the EU

Popa, Rohrschneider and Schmitt (2015: 46) argue that the presence of Spitzenkandidaten, the lead candidates, in the European Parliament elections 2014 polarized the European public: *“Those who support the EU believe the EU has become more democratic as a result of the leading candidates. But those who generally view the EU skeptically oppose it even more when they are aware of the presence of pro-EU candidates.”* As a result of the Spitzenkandidaten process Eurosceptical voters became even more sceptical, and the other way around (Thomassen 2016: 545).

By taking into account the criticism by Popa, Rohrschneider, Schmitt and Thomassen,

the first research question concerning the citizens' attitudes towards the European Union was further studied by testing hypothesis:

H₁: Citizens with positive attitude towards the European Union consider the Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy more likely than the citizens with negative attitude towards the European Union.

H₁ is supported. Attitude on Membership is statically significant variable. More a person thinks his/her country's membership of the EU is a good thing, the more likely person is willing to think that the Spitzenkandidaten process represents progress for democracy (estimate ,449).

In addition, image on the EU has statistically significant relation with the attitude towards the Spitzenkandidaten process. The better image of the EU a person has, the more likely person is willing to think that the Spitzenkandidaten process represents progress for democracy (estimate ,656).

These findings are supported by the earlier studies (Balestrini 2012: 372) arguing that the electorates have utilitarian motives to support further integration as they evaluate the integration process by its costs and benefits, on national and individual levels. It is notable that citizens' attitude towards the entire political system and the political system's outputs may differ when studying citizens' opinions on the reforms like Spitzenkandidaten process. People may refuse, for example, a common foreign and security policy without questioning the integration project itself. (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 158.)

Those citizens who tend to find their attitude towards the EU positive and the membership of their country in the union a good thing, are more likely also those who tend to benefit personally from the membership. This is also seen in the results as those who were older when completing his/her full time education, the more supportive he/she was for the argument. This may indicate that the higher education one has, the more opportunities EU membership produces in a personal level.

The result indicate support also for the argument (Stoeckel 2012: 39) that trust in EU institutions turns electorates less negative and less ambivalent about the European Union and clarifies that this is especially the case among citizens who have a high trust on the EU institutions and who are very much attached to Europe. As argued by Balestrini (2012: 373 – 380) exclusive or inclusive national identity is a more important factor to explain the level of support on the EU than economic utilitarianism as national identity and sovereignty is considered to be threatened in the process of further European integration among some of the electorates and decreases the support for of the Union. EU Institutions can foster the legitimacy if its' citizens perceive institution to work effectively to resolve the problems that concern them (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 156).

As already stated, 7,5 % of the respondents in the question told they were unemployed at the time of the survey conducted. Among the citizens who were not unemployed at the time of the survey taking place the support for the statement that Spitzenkandidaten process represent progress for democracy is statistically significantly higher than among those who were unemployed at the time of the survey taking place. This indicates support for Thomassen's (2016: 549) argument that *“every time the system fails to deliver, result is declining levels of trust and a crisis of confidence in the regime as a whole.”* As stated by Mishler and Rose (2001: 33), democratic institutions can generate increased trust that originates in institutional performance by providing economic growth and abstaining from repressive and corrupt practices.

It has been argued, that neither European Parliament elections nor the national elections cannot be defined as “European” elections as these elections are not about *“the personalities and parties at the European level or the direction of the EU policy agenda.”* If there is no “European” element in national and European elections, the risk that EU citizens' preferences on issues on the EU policy agenda have only an indirect influence on EU policy outcomes, increases (Follesdal & Hix 2006: 536.) Wass (2014: 32) argues that one significant factor for voters' low motivation to vote and participate is that voter' may lack alternatives. The Spitzenkandidaten process has been criticized to lack the left-right dimension (Thomassen 2016: 547). Next, the political orientation on the process is under a closer look.

6.3. Political orientation and the Spitzenkandidaten process

The aim of parliamentary elections is to select a parliament that represent the policy preferences of the voters (Thomassen 2016: 550). If no representatives is found to reflect equal concern and respect for voters' views and interests, or voter representatives fail to promote policies that advance them on an equal basis, a representation deficit occurs (Bellamy & Kröger 2013: 481). Also if ideologies and goals of the main parties are quite similar, it is difficult for the public to distinguish between parties (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 161).

The European Parliament Elections at least prior the 2014 elections are considered as second order elections. The nature of the elections as a second order elections is introduced as one of the main explanations for the low European-wide turnout in the European parliament elections in this thesis.

European parliament elections have a lower turnout than in national elections, because rival political parties allocate fewer resources to the European parliament election campaigns and those who have right to vote in the elections have lower incentives to use their vote. European parliament elections do not have a direct impact on the formation of national government, but electorates may try use their vote to influence the policies of the existing or the next government. (Hix & Marsh 2007: 495.)

The second research question concerning the relation between the citizens' political orientation and their attitude towards the Spitzenkandidaten process was further studied by testing hypothesis:

H₂: The citizens' position on the scale of political "left" and "right" does not explain significantly the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union.

H₂ is supported. The ordinal regression analysis shows that the citizens' position on the scale of political "left" and "right" does not explain statistically significantly the atti-

tudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union (Sig₄₂₈ > 0,05). Also Estimate is small 0,005.

One aim of the Spitzenkandidaten process was to personalize the distant Brussels bureaucracy, strengthen the European element in the campaigns and “*thereby increase interests and participation in European democracy*” (Hobolt 2014: 3) and “*to increase the legitimacy of the European institutions by strengthening the electoral connection between the voters and the European Commission*” (Thomassen 2016: 544). From this point of view, the result of the ordinal regression analysis supports Thomassen's argument (2016: 547) that Spitzenkandidaten process failed to connect the will of the European electorate to European public policy as the process dearth the connection on the left-right dimension. According to Thomassen (2016: 547) more attention should be put on left-right dimension as the dimension clearly affects in the decision-making process in the European Parliament.

Thomassen (2016: 545 – 554) explains that lack of “truly European political parties competing for the votes of a European electorate on the basis of European issues” is challenging the nature of the European Parliament elections as pan-European elections as the elections are “fought by national political parties on national rather than European issues and decided by national electorates who make their choice on the basis of national rather than European issues.”

As stated by Fratescu (2015: 108) “*EU debates are conducted on what is largely a two-dimensional basis: pro-EU or anti-EU, and left versus right.*” European integration can be supported by both sides of the political scale, from the left and from the right. The level of support depends on the context, for example “*the left favors more integration in employment policy, while the right favors market integration.*” (Marks 2004: 241.) As the result shows the Spitzenkandidaten process can be supported by both sides of the political scale, from the left and from the right.

Policy making in the EU level is often considered so complex and distant that the ordinary citizen may not be even expected to be interested about it. Also, the result of

the pan European elections may not be seen widely affecting in policies carried out in the domestic level.

There are different ways to increase the level of political awareness among the citizens, but in a case of Spitzenkandidaten process, as criticized by Braun and Popa (2018: 4), at least the political parties did not put too much effort to explain the idea behind Spitzenkandidaten process to their voters, as political debates - initiated by the political parties - on the issue were rare. According to Braun and Popa (2018: 4) emphasizing the Spitzenkandidaten a political topic was not seen strategically advantageous from a perspective of political parties. Next, we will test if the level of political awareness among the citizens had impact how they related to the process.

6.4. Levels political awareness and the attitude towards the Spitzenkandidaten process

This thesis introduces political awareness as a basis for political activity. In addition, political trust and political legitimacy are emphasized notably important factors influencing the voters' minds when forming their opinion on the European Union.

Ordinary citizens do not necessarily need to form their own opinion on all political issues as the core idea of representative democracy is largely based on the principle where the citizens delegate the practical political decision-making for their elected representatives. Ideally, the decision to vote should be based on at least basic level of information on the political differences between political parties and the functioning of the political system. (Grönlund 2009: 175; Rapeli & Leino 2013: 4.)

As argued by Follesdal and Hix (2006: 536) EU is different from the domestic democratic institutions that citizens are used to. This may have psychological consequences as citizens are not able to understand the EU, *“and so will never be able to assess and regard it as a democratic system writ large, nor to identify with it.”* Completely regardless of whether the Union has even power to intervene in these matters - Eurobarometer surveys show that the citizens of the Union are expecting the Union to act effective policy actions to combat unemployment, environmental problems and international organized crime, as well as in solving international crises (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 158).

Political awareness has at least two dimensions. Political awareness is related to the rules of political decision-making, for example, in democracy, the institutions' power and responsibility relations. In addition, political awareness refers to citizens' understanding of the differences between policy makers, for example parties and politicians and their positions on topical political issues. (Grönlund 2009: 175.)

The *objective level of political awareness* can be measured by operating some kind of policy quiz in the context of a survey, for example the researchers ask questions about the rules of political system. This was the method also in the Parlemeter 2014. Political awareness is often measured indirectly by so-called indicators of *internal political efficacy*. Internal efficacy refers to the citizen's own perception of how well he/she understands politics and is able to influence into it. (Grönlund 2009: 177.)

The third research question concerning the relation between the citizens' attitude towards the Spitzenkandidaten process and political awareness on the processes of decision making in the EU was further studied by testing hypothesis:

H₃: Citizens who have a high level of awareness on the processes of decision making in the EU consider Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy more likely than the rest of the citizens.

The result of the ordinal regression analysis indicates support for H₃. According to evaluations given to the statement “*Q18: Can you tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: the election of the President and the European Commission as a whole by the European Parliament based on the results of the European elections represents significant progress for democracy within the EU?*” both variables “objective awareness” and “internal efficacy” are statistically significant variables. The better level of awareness, both objectively and subjectively measured, the more likely person is willing to think Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy.

It is worth noticing, that the statement turned out to be a difficult one to be evaluated as circa one third of the respondents in the Parlemeter 2014 refused to evaluate or did not evaluate the statement. In the other words, only 18570 out of 27801 respondents had an opinion on the issue. It might be that the statement was too difficult to evaluate in the case that the respondent was not aware of the whole Spitzenkandidaten process before answering to the survey. It would not be surprising, as according to the earlier studies (Thomassen 2016: 545 – 547), even the recognition of the lead candidates among the eligible EU citizens was in a low level as dramatically low portion of respondents, less than 20 percent of the European electorate, were able to link the lead candidates to the correct party.

In addition, the question might have been difficult to answer as concepts of democratic deficit and vice versa, democratic development, have no single meaning as its definitions are different as the nationality, intellectual positions and preferred solutions of the scholars or commentators who write on the subject vary (Follesdal & Hix 2006: 534). Already in this thesis, democratic deficit in the context of the European Union refers to a number of factors, such as: 1) limited possibilities of the national parliaments to monitor the Union's decision-making, 2) status of the national actors and themes in European Parliament elections, 3) electorates weak representation in the Union as well as 4) the conflict of private and public interests as the result of increased role of interest groups in the decision-making (Wass 2014: 29). Thomassen (2016: 549) criticize that at the EU-level the voter have no measure to hold anything or anybody accountable for European policies at the next election. A serious democratic deficit occurs “*since at the national level more and more voters are inclined to take into account their judgment of the incumbent government.*“

Table 3. Support for the hypotheses

Hypothesis	Supported by ordinal regression analysis
H1: <i>Citizens with positive attitude towards the European Union consider the Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy more likely than the citizens with negative attitude towards the European Union.</i>	X
H2: <i>The citizens' position on the scale of political "left" and "right" does not explain significantly the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union.</i>	X
H3: <i>Citizens who have a high level of awareness on the processes of decision making in the EU consider Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy more likely than the rest of the citizens.</i>	X

In this chapter, the theories and criticism of earlier research were applied and tested by studying three research questions. The support for the hypotheses is summarized in the **table 3**.

The result of the ordinal regression analysis tend to support the results and analysis of the earlier studies on democratic deficit in the context of the EU. As argued by Stoeckel (2012: 23), citizens do not view political issues and objects in an exclusively positive or negative way, but testing the hypotheses have shown that *the image on EU in general* is an important distinguishing factor when the public opinion on EU reforms is formed, in this case the public opinion on the *Spitzenkandidaten process*. The better image of the EU a person has, the more likely person is willing to think that the Spitzenkandidaten process represents progress for democracy.

As Thomassen (2016: 547) argue Spitzenkandidaten process lacked the connection on the left-right dimension. The ordinal regression analysis shows that the citizens' position on the scale of political "left" and "right" does not explain statistically significantly the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union. This is problematic from democratic progress point of view as a representation deficit occurs if no representatives is found to reflect equal concern and respect for voters' views and interests (Bellamy & Kröger 2013: 481).

According to the ordinal regression analysis, the better level of political awareness, both objectively and subjectively measured, the more likely person is willing to think Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy. Political awareness is considered as a basis for political activity. If a voter does not know or understand how his / her vote will effect on the political system, the motivation to vote is easy to consider to be low. Therefore, the lack of knowledge among citizens on how political system works is a risk for democracy.

Evaluated from a perspective of electoral accountability, Spitzenkandidaten process still lacks an important factor to be considered a progress for democracy, as electoral accountability would require voters' awareness of party identity of the candidates (Thomassen 2016: 549). Political issues tend to be complex by their nature. As stated earlier, it not realistic to assume that ordinary citizens would form their own opinion on all political issues. Therefore representative democracy is largely based on the principle of citizens giving the practical political decision-making for their elected representatives.

As the macro-institutional theories on political trust assume, the outputs of institutions, such as *"promoting growth, governing effectively, and avoiding corruption"*, determine individual responses on reforms. To be able to form opinions about the innovations like Spitzenkandidaten process in the future, citizens would need to be better informed about the reforms. More focus should be given to the active communication between the EU and its citizens. One reason behind the low level of knowledge on Spitzenkandidaten process was that political parties did not put effort to explain idea behind the

Spitzenkandidaten process to their voters (Braun & Popa 2018: 4). As the results of ordinal regression analysis this study show, the knowledge reduces the resistance for reforms, at least in the case of Spitzenkandidaten process. The low level of political knowledge among citizens hinders the democracy progress in the EU.

In this chapter, the theories of earlier research were tested by studying three hypotheses. In the next chapter, the conclusions of this thesis are presented. In addition, suggestions for the future research are proposed.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This thesis highlights the relationship between the citizens and the European Union's institutions and aims to participate in ongoing discussion on the changing nature of European Union and its future. The thesis sheds light on European Union's attempts to increase the voting turn out and decrease the democratic deficit in the European Parliament elections by focusing especially on one of the most topical instrument: *Spitzenkandidaten process*. The research aimed to produce essential and topical information for the decision makers when making up one's minds whether to support or not to support the reform.

The process of Spitzenkandidaten (lead candidate) was implemented for the first time in the European Parliament elections 2014. On the process, European-level parties had proposed rival candidates, the so called Spitzenkandidaten (lead candidates) to run for the president of the Commission prior to the elections (Hobolt 2014: 2).

Spitzenkandidaten process was hoped to personalize the distant Brussels bureaucracy, strengthen the European element in the campaigns and “*thereby increase interests and participation in European democracy*” (Hobolt 2014: 3) and “*to increase the legitimacy of the European institutions by strengthening the electoral connection between the voters and the European Commission*” (Thomassen 2016: 544).

In this thesis, the views of the citizens and the public opinion on Spitzenkandidaten process and its effects on the state of democracy within the EU was the main topic of interest. The data studied in this thesis contains the data set of the Parlemeter of the European Parliament (EB/EP 82.4) conducted face-to-face by TNS opinion, in the 28 Member States, among 27801 EU citizens aged 15 and over. The data was processed and analyzed with SPSS version 24 (SPSS Inc., Chicago IL). As analytical method the ordinal regression analysis was used in this research.

Political awareness is introduced as a basis for political activity. In addition, political trust and political legitimacy were emphasized notably important factors influencing the

voters' minds when forming their opinion on the European Union.

This thesis has three research question formulated as follows:

1) To what extent the attitudes towards the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?

2) To what extent the position on the scale of political left and political right explains the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens' of the Union?

3) To what extent the level of awareness about the processes of decision making in the European Union explains whether the Spitzenkandidaten process is or is not considered to represent progress for democracy within the EU among the citizens' of the Union?

7.1. The main findings

On their research on the impact of lead candidates on voters' perceptions of the quality of democracy in the EU Popa, Rohrschneider and Schmitt (2015: 46) argue that the presence of Spitzenkandidaten, the lead candidates, in the European Parliament elections 2014 polarized the European public: *"Those who support the EU believe the EU has become more democratic as a result of the leading candidates. But those who generally view the EU skeptically oppose it even more when they are aware of the presence of pro-EU candidates."*

The findings of this research support the argument. The results of the ordinal regression analysis show that more a person thinks his/her country's membership of the EU is a good thing, the more likely the person is willing to think that the Spitzenkandidaten process represents progress for democracy. In addition, image on the EU has statistically significant relation with the attitude towards the Spitzenkandidaten process. The better image of the EU a person has, the more likely person is willing to think that the Spitzenkandidaten process represents progress for democracy.

The ordinal regression analysis shows that the citizens' position on the scale of political "left" and "right" does not explain statistically significantly the attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten process among the citizens of the Union. As the result shows, the Spitzenkandidaten process is supported by both sides of the political scale, from the left and from the right.

According to Thomassen (2016: 547) more attention should be put on left-right dimension as the dimension clearly affects in the decision-making process in the European Parliament. From this point of view, the result of the ordinal regression analysis supports Thomassen's argument (2016: 547) that Spitzenkandidaten process failed to connect the will of the European electorate to European public policy as the process dearth the connection on the left-right dimension.

Representative democracy is largely based on the principle of citizens giving the practical political decision-making for their elected representatives. This way, ordinary citizens do not necessarily need to form their own opinion on all political issues. The decision to vote should be based on at least basic level of information on the political differences between political parties and the functioning of the political system. (Grönlund 2009: 175.) As the results of the ordinal regression analysis show, the better level of political awareness, both objectively and subjectively measured, the more likely person is willing to think Spitzenkandidaten process to represent progress for democracy.

By closely studying one concrete example of the EU's attempts to decrease the democratic deficit in its decision making, the Spitzenkandidaten process, this thesis has shed light into variety of reasons behind the paradox presented in introduction chapter: although the voter were "*more influential than ever*" in the European Parliament elections 2014, the European-wide turnout of the elections reached a new record low.

Relying to the results of the earlier studies, this thesis introduced three main explanations for the low European-wide turnout in the European parliament elections; European parliament elections as second order elections, lack of European demos and deficits of democracy and representation in the EU decision-making.

In this thesis, the Spitzenkandidaten process is considered as one more institutional attempt in the Union's history combating deficits of democracy and representation in the EU decision-making. As the previous studies show, improving the democratic decision-making system is just part of a solution as institutional solutions do not necessarily decrease the gap between the Union and its citizens - at least not in the short term (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 156).

As Stoeckel (2012: 39) points out trust in EU institutions turns electorates less negative and less ambivalent about the European Union and clarifies that this is especially the case among politically sophisticated citizens who have a high trust on the EU institutions and who are very much attached to Europe. The findings of this research are supported by the earlier studies (Balestrini 2012: 372.) arguing that the electorates have utilitarian motives to support further integration as they evaluate the integration process by its costs and benefits, on national and individual levels.

The study have shown that *the image on EU in general* is an important distinguishing factor when the public opinion on EU reforms is formed, in this case the public opinion on the Spitzenkandidaten process. The balance between democracy and representation in the EU level is challenging to achieve, because "*overcoming the democratic deficit risks producing a representation deficit and vice versa*" (Bellamy & Kröger 2013: 494). Citizens will experience the Union generating financial or other benefit, for example, if the Union successfully promotes the issues important to the its' citizens such as peace and stable economic development. (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 156.)

Democratic institutions can generate increased trust that originates in institutional performance by providing economic growth and abstaining from repressive and corrupt practices (Mishler and Rose 2001: 33) and foster the legitimacy if its' citizens perceive institution to work effectively to resolve the problems that concern them (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 156) but "*every time the system fails to deliver, result is declining levels of trust and a crisis of confidence in the regime as a whole*" (Thomassen 2016: 549). Democratic deficit has no single meaning as its definitions are different as the backgrounds of the scholars or commentators who write on the subject have are different.

The nationality, intellectual positions and preferred solutions vary (Follesdal & Hix 2006: 534).

This research and its findings emphasize the role of political awareness as one of key elements to focus on when combating the democratic deficit in the European Union. As earlier studies on Eurobarometer surveys (Raunio & Wiberg 1999: 158) show, the citizens of the Union are expecting the Union to act effective policy actions to combat unemployment, environmental problems and international organized crime, as well as in solving international crises - completely regardless of whether the Union has even power to intervene in these matters. To sum up, the finding of this research support the findings in earlier research: Democratic deficit occurs until the EU-citizens understand how the Union effect on their lives (Wass 2014: 37).

7.2. Potential themes for further study

The European Parliament Elections in 2014 took place in a political climate where the Eurozone crisis had polarized opinions about the direction of European integration across the member states (Christiansen 2016: 992). Since the beginning of economic crisis in 2008 the satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and trust in European institutions had dramatically decreased among EU citizens (Thomassen 2016: 554).

As stated in this thesis, trust is a crucial element to democracy as it links citizens to the institutions that are intended to represent them (Mishler & Rose 2001: 30). Thomassen (2016: 544) argue that the dearth of trust among the voters was one central explanation for the rise of the Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament elections 2014. As Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003: 7) point out diagnoses of the reasons for distrust in public institutions vary from low performance of public institutions to increased demands of the citizens.

From economist point of view, the presence or absence of trust determinates whether there will be co-operation or polarization (Mishler & Rose 2001: 30). To be able to understand the polarized attitudes on the EU among the citizens, the role of changing na-

ture of the demands among EU-citizens would be worth a further research in a context of EU reforms. The research question for further studies would then possibly be: *How well the reforms have met the demands of the citizens after the Lisbon Treaty?* This study has been an attempt to analyze the question in the context of the Spitzenkandidaten process and the European Parliament elections 2014.

The data used in the study represents one instantaneous moment and therefore the study is a cross-sectional analysis by its nature. The Spitzenkandidaten process is possible implemented next time 2019 as the new parliament and the new President for Commission will be elected. The comparative approach and research question would then possibly be: *How the attitudes of the citizens on the Spitzenkandidaten process have changed between the elections or have they?*

It is obvious that the European Parliament sees itself as a major player promoting European-level democracy, but also the role of national parliaments in the preparation of EU decisions is important to take into account (Wass 2014: 37). This study has its focus on the views of the citizens of the EU member states. Alternatively, the attitudes of national parliaments on the Spitzenkandidaten process would be also interesting topic of a research on the field of administration and organization studies. The research question would then possibly be: *Is there variation in the attitudes among national parliaments on the process and if there is what kind of reasons are there behind them?*

Still, in the spring 2018, the Spitzenkandidaten process is still under discussion on the EU level, whether it should be applied also in the future elections when the new parliament and the new President for Commission will be elected. The Spitzenkandidaten process had a little impact on the turnout in the elections 2014, but the process and its consequences are one step in the ever-going rival for power in the European Union between supranational institutions and the member states (Deckram 2016: 1).

According the European Commission, the 2014 experiment should be continued and developed. The Commission highlights the need to continue the open debate for the best possible process (Euroopan komissio 2018: 4). The European Parliament has expressed

that Parliament is not ready to support those candidates for the presidency of the Commission who have not been nominated as the Spitzenkandidaten, lead candidate, for the 2019 elections (Euroopan parlamentti 2018). The European Council has stated that it cannot give up its right to propose a nominee for the President of the Commission, unless the Treaty is amended (Eurooppa-neuvosto 2018) as member states still are not convinced by the lead candidate process (Russack 2018).

The potential next time to apply the process is already in the elections 2019. There is a risk that different perspectives of these major European institutions and the lack of consensus on the issue make the whole Spitzenkandidaten process difficult to perceive for the voter. If the voter has difficulties to understand how his / her vote will effects the political system, the decrease in turnout may occur once again. From the perspective of EU's democratic development, that would not be anything worth hoping for. Therefore, the process is highly topical subject for further study.

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